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Kennecott Set to Mine Golden Real Estate

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When a Kennecott executive looks at the sprawling 100,000 acres his company owns along the western Salt Lake Valley and parts of neighboring Tooele County, his eyes brighten.

Ah, a new gold mine.

No, Kennecott does not plan to harvest copper, gold, silver or any other metals from the vast acreage. Instead, the mining company wants to plant neighborhoods -- planned communities complete with homes, townhouses, apartments, restaurants, stores, offices, roads, open spaces and transit connections.

Why is Kennecott now looking to make its money above ground instead of beneath the surface?

Simple. Within 15 or 20 years, the century-old copper giant will have no more ore to dig. It will shut down its mines and smelters, clean up the landscape and turn to developing residential and retail centers.

Some 40,000 acres could end up being developed. The remaining 60,000 would remain open space -- except for the world's largest open-pit mine, which probably will live on as a tourist attraction.

Kennecott's holdings stretch along both sides of the Oquirrh Mountains from the Great Salt Lake to the southern tip of the Salt Lake Valley, including parcels around Stansbury Park and Stockton in eastern Tooele County.

"In three decades, there could be 90,000 to 100,000 people living on this land," says Peter McMahon, president of Kennecott Development Co., which was created to plan the company's nonmining future.

McMahon says these new communities are a long way off, except for one: Sunrise.

Builders plan to break ground sometime next year on this unique project, in South Jordan between 10200 South and 11800 South and between 4000 West and state Route 111 (about 7200 West). The master plan calls for a 15-year building cycle that will double the population of South Jordan to 60,000.

Sunrise's 4,200 acres will include a variety of housing types, ranging from single-family homes to condos and apartments -- all clustered within walking distance of retail and office centers and surrounded by open space.

Neighborhoods would be oriented around light rail or buses to get residents to their jobs or other activities throughout the valley. A key component is a TRAX extension from the proposed mid-Jordan line planned for West Jordan and Midvale.

"We're excited because we have the ability to take a raw piece of ground and from the very beginning decide where roads ought to be, parks, government buildings, commercial areas, trails -- everything," says South Jordan Assistant City Manager Keith Morey. "This type of development allows us to look way out into the future and develop a portion of our community, or multiple communities, that flow together and fit together and offer a different atmosphere than found elsewhere."

Planned communities such as Sunrise are relatively new to the Mountain West. They started sprouting nationally in the 1960s, giving birth to such cities as Irvine, Calif.; Reston, Va.; and Columbia, Md.

The arrival of these communities sparked a slow-burning fuse, says Jonathan Callender, Kennecott Development's vice president for resource development.

"There is a national trend toward more of that kind of development," he says. "As a response to the concern about suburban sprawl, these communities offer a lifestyle that is more and more sought after."

So Kennecott's new communities will not be the usual Wasatch Front development. There will be no gated neighborhoods, no hilltop homes and no steep-slope construction.

"Our goal is to put these communities into the environment, not take over the environment," Callender says.

This concept excites environmentalists and growth planners eager to create communities around open spaces and without obsessive dependence on cars.

"Where else in America do you have 100,000 acres of land, yet unplanned, next to a major urban area?" asks Dave Livermore, state director for the Nature Conservancy. Kennecott has "a tremendous opportunity to do it right."

McMahon, an Australian who arrived earlier this year to head the new enterprise, won't speculate on where Kennecott will start building after Sunrise.

But he points to prime company real estate around east Tooele County's popular Stansbury Park as a possibility. Once the mining ends and the tailings area east of the smelter is cleaned up, it would become 10,000 acres of coveted real estate on Salt Lake City's growing western fringe.

Such prospects encourage Tooele County planner Nicole Cline. Kennecott's ambitious goals could help her county move toward "quality growth" as it struggles to accommodate an influx of Salt Lake Valley residents. During the 1990s, Tooele County's population swelled by 53 percent.

"What they are doing fits well with what we are attempting to do," Cline says. She says the mix of single-family homes, condos

and apartments will lure a range of income earners.

Steve Holbrook, executive director of the "smart-growth" planning partnership Envision Utah, says, "If they [Kennecott] are able to do this as they have laid out, the people of this valley will have a multiplicity of benefits."

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